

Testimony submitted to the Education Committee
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H.B. No. 5452, AN ACT CONCERNING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE TASK FORCE ON LIFE-THREATENING FOOD ALLERGIES IN SCHOOLS

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Mother of a five year old daughter with a tree nut allergy, who attends West Hartford Public Schools (Bugbee Elementary), and three sons, ages 3.5 and 1.5 year old twins.

This week, you have likely heard about the case of 12 year old Amanda Huynh, who suffered a fatal anaphylactic reaction on the school bus after consuming a granola bar. I believe that formal rules regarding food allergies and school transportation may have resulted in a far different and less tragic outcome, which is why I support H.B. No. 5452, AN ACT CONCERNING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE TASK FORCE ON LIFE-THREATENING FOOD ALLERGIES IN SCHOOLS.

This bill addresses important concerns regarding the safety of food allergic students, including allowing school transportation personnel to intervene in an allergy emergency and having the state update current school food allergy guidelines.

According to the Food Allergy Research & Education (FARE) organization, 15 million Americans have food allergies, including 5.9 million children. That's one in 13 children, or roughly two in every classroom, including my five year old daughter, Ava, who was recently diagnosed with a tree nut allergy after eating a coffee cake that contained walnuts on Christmas Day.

Connecticut is among the top five states for anaphylactic food reactions and food allergy diagnosis insurance claims, says FARE. The state needs to update its policies to protect children with severe, life threatening allergies who travel to or from school on the school bus.

School bus drivers undergo comprehensive training for their jobs, including first aid. It makes sense to also train them to recognize the signs of anaphylaxis and how to administer an epinephrine auto-injector, which is a device designed for lay people like us to use. The nurse at our allergist's office showed me how to use Ava's Auvi-Q in less than five minutes and it even includes audio instructions once you open the case. Luckily, we've never had to use it.

Ava has an Auvi-Q at home and one at school in the nurse's office, where it sits in a locked cabinet alongside several dozen more Epi-Pens and other epinephrine auto-injectors that belong to the many other food allergic children at Bugbee Elementary School in West Hartford. I am confident she is safe at school. But I'm very concerned about her daily bus rides to and from school. During the roughly 20 minutes she spends on the school bus every morning and again every afternoon, she does not have access to her life saving medication in the event of an emergency.

Transportation is a right for every student and needs to be safe. Our current policies and guidelines are outdated. Current Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) guidelines for students with food allergies were written in 2006, updated in 2012, and lag behind current medical and legal standards of care. For example, CSDE guidelines do not acknowledge that food allergies may be considered a disability under the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Let's learn from Amanda's tragedy and prevent the same thing from happening here in Connecticut. Let's adopt common sense rules that protect our children not just at school but on the school bus as well.